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ABSTRACT

Based on the hypothesis that the low academic achievement of Brazilian children attending government schools was directly related to a discrepancy between the children's working-class dialect and the school's dialect which is closer to upper class speech, a study was undertaken in literacy classes in one private and one public school where the difference in dialects was most extreme. Data were drawn from classroom observation; unstructured interviews with teachers, parents, and children; analysis of the children's text and written work; and dictation to each class of a made-up text in the vernacular. The results suggest that in the public school (1) it is language function rather than grammar that impedes the pedagogical process, (2) the main sociolinguistic question connected with language education is related to the child's previous knowledge and social background, and (3) the play element has been left out of the instructional programs, to the detriment of learning. Both classrooms tended toward linguistic artificiality, but in the public school, the teacher-pupil interaction and communication was far less than in the private school. Teachers' classroom language was found to differ from both the children's language and the teachers' adult language. Anger and use of authority were common elements in teacher language. A fundamental change in educational approach is recommended, an approach built on the principle that freedom, joy, and purpose are essentials of education. (MSE)

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SOCIOLINGUISTIC DETERMINANTS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN BRAZILIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Sociolinguistic Determinants of Academic Achievement in Brazilian Public Schools

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This paper is a report on research in progress. At the time of submitting it to the American Educational Research Association, the low academic achievement of Brazilian children attending government-supported schools was viewed as bearing a direct relationship to differences between the children's and the school's dialects. The question was therefore approached from a strictly sociolinguistic standpoint, since public school children are mostly working-class children speaking a working-class dialect, whereas the school's dialect is closer to the dialect spoken by the upper classes, and the school does not make allowances for alternative ways of linguistic expression.

Apparently, this is now an old-fashioned line of research. After all it is a long time since ethno and sociolinguists first tackled the issue of the interdependence between language, social class and academic achievement, and opened the deficit/difference discussion (Cf. Fasold and Shuy (1970), Bernstein (1971), Labov (1972), Escobar (1974), Le Page (1978) and Nidelcoff (1975)).

At a certain stage of the development of educational-

linguistic research, this problem drew the attention of such bodies as UNESCO. In Bull's review of UNESCO's monograph on the use of vernacular languages in education (In Hymes, 1964) we read that "the UNESCO's committee's major reaction to this formidable situation... is... that every pupil shoud begin his formal education in his mother tongue", that is, in the vernacular.

In Brazil it was Renault (1975) who first related Brazilian educational problems to the broader issue raised by UNESCO, in a report submitted by him to the Federal Council of Education, in which he misinterprets the word vernacular and comes forward with a proposal for the "restoration of the Portuguese language in Brazil".

Baranow (1983) deals with this terminological question. He goes back to the original meaning of the word vernacular (Lat. vernaculu - "referring to a slave born in the master's house") and compares its current Portuguese meaning, i.e. standard language, with the meaning it has developed internationally: Black English and, later, casual styles, in the United States (Cf. Labov (1972) in Baranow (1983)), non-standard dialect or creole in Britain (Cf. Lyons (1982) and Bull (1964)). Baranow warns that the Brazilian use of the word is an instance of terminological transfer which can be highly inconvenient for the borrowing language.

At first sight this may seem a trifling question. Yet, I take it to be basic to our discussion (Cf. Moraes, 1980, 1984), since it has prevented Brazilian official educational bodies from questioning the established concept of mother tongue, its function in the public school and the methods used to impart it to children.

Much as we praise the (apparent) linguistic unity of Brazil, we must admit that the mother tongues of Brazilian children are different from the language taught by school, the differences at times being quite substantial.

Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated that language is variable (Cf. Labov, 1976). It is, therefore, expected that speakers know how to deal with differences whether they are major or minor. Psycholinguistic studies also support the assumption that, at a very early age, children become aware of the various uses of language. In a case study carried out in the northeast of Brazil, Rego (1985) shows that a young child is capable of recognizing and producing different varieties of language such as those in which letters, stories, newspapers, etc. are rendered, thus showing a multilectal competence. Therefore, in theory, school language differences should not create such serious communication problems as at first may be imagined. This seems to be confirmed in practice. I admit that language prejudices do play a part in academic failure. In the

specific case of Brazilian public schools, evaluation procedures leave ample space for turning a different language use into a criminal act to be punished with low grades and failure. But language performance evaluation and the prejudices that go with it are only symptoms of a more complex network of problems involved in language education.

The research which provides the basis for this paper was carried out between March and December 1984, in two literacy classrooms. The choice of the schools to be investigated was based on socieconomic criteria, so as to maximize differences between the school's and the child's language varieties. As public schools in Brazil are, as a rule, socioeconomically defficient, I selected one private school and one public school to provide a good socieconomic contrast for this study.

Methodological procedures involved (1) 90 minute daily visits to both schools, during which time direct observation was carried out, by means of recording of classroom language events on cassete tapes and annotation, (2) unstructured interviews with teachers, parents and children, and (3) analysis of the children's Primer and of their own written work. During the course of the investigation, I decided to make use of an additional data collecting procedure, i.e I dictated to each class a made up text rendered in the vernacular, i.e in non-standard Portuguese.

The analysis and interpretation of the data was conducted during 1985 by a team of three research assistants under my supervision.

Conclusions have shown that (1) the language differences detected in the classroom are not sufficiently big to explain academic failure, since they do not block teacher/child interaction, (2) the children in both groups showed a bidialectal competence, at least at the lexical level: they were able to "translate" words from one dialect to the other.

Yet, academic achievement was noticeably different in the two schools, as shown by the reading/writing performance of the children at the end of the year. So, we had to look for reasons elsewhere.

As we proceeded in our examination of the data and classified the language samples obtained, we always bore in mind the classroom atmosphere in which those events took place and my own perception of the mode of interaction between teacher and child. The data examined led us to believe that:

1. Rather than language form (i.e grammar), it is language function (i.e discourse) that interferes with the pedagogical process in the public school.
2. The main sociolinguistic question connected with language education in the public school has to do

with the child's previous knowledge and social background.

3. Public schools have left the play element out of the pedagogical programmes and this has impaired learning.

As far as language form is concerned, both classrooms showed a marked tendency towards linguistic artificiality. It should be noted that this is an aspect of language education which is drawing the attention of educational researchers both at home and abroad, all pointing to a more basic issue, i.e the lack of authenticity in the classroom (Cf. Abaurre et al (1985), Bautier - Castaing (1982) and Moraes (1985)). Abaurre et al refer to the school as a farce and to teaching as a robotizing process. They suggest that in a society marked by class distinctions, such as ours, it would not be in the interest of the school to make children able to voice their own ideas in writing. And Moraes states that it is the artificial dialect of the classroom that blocks the child's way to learning, rather than any possible dialect conflicts.

In the case of the Brazilian public school, the idiosyncratic conduction of formal language education, as we see it, can be noticed at three levels of linguistic structuring: (1) phonological, (2) syntactic and (3) textual.

At the phonological level, one can notice a tendency towards spelling pronunciation which affects the child's first reading and writing efforts and, in most cases, interferes with his/her oral performance itself. At the syntactic level, it is the child's Primer that sets the tone. Sentences in the Primer are in general short and never run on to the next line. They have an average of 5 nouns to 1 verb and have a preference for simple indicative forms inappropriately matched to dynamic verbs. This caricature of a text is absorbed by the child in his/her first writing attempts.

At the textual level, we notice that the text as a unit of communication, hardly emerges in the literacy classes. Here is a typical school text (glosses provided):

O gato bica o nabo.

(The cat pecks the turnip)

Nina come banana.

(Nina eats banana)

Fābio deu uma boneca a Lalā.

(Fābio gave a doll to Lalā)

Ana dā banana ao macaco.

(Ana gives banana to-the monkey)

(Extrated from a public school lesson).

In the other cases, the purpose of the "text" is pretty evident: to teach phoneme/grapheme associations, as in the

following sentence:

A lagartixa xereta mora na caixa do engraxate.

(The lizard nosy lives in-the box of-the shoe-shine-boy)

(From Mágica das Palavras).

Under stimuli such as these, whatever attemts the child makes to produce a written text turn out to be a sequence of inarticulate sentences, without cohesion or coherence and communicating nothing but the idea that the so-called "text" is but a means to an end, i.e the acquisition of the orthografic system.

Here is a sample identified by Abaurre et al (1985):

Dadá dá na macaca.

(Dadá gives a (spanking) in-the monkey)

A macaca da mata é má.

(The monkey of-the woods is bad)

O dado é da Dadá.

(The die is of-the Dadá)

A macaca dá na pata.

(The monkey gives a (spanking) in-the duck)

Naná dá na macaca.

(Naná gives a (spanking) in-the monkey)

A pata nada.

(The duck swims)

Esta casa é da Zazá.

Esta casa ẽ da Zazã.

(This house is of-the Zazã)

("Text" produced by a 1st grader in Campinas, São Paulo).

In every case, one can clearly notice that it is not language that is being taught, but the mechanics of writing.

In a survey of the phonological, lexical and syntactic forms used by teacher and child, we discovered that three dialects co-occur in the classroom: (1) the child's, (2) the teacher's while an ordinary speaker, and (3) the teacher's while acting as teacher (referred to in the project as classroom dialect).

A pilot analysis showed that around 70% of the language forms used in the public school classroom are shared by teacher and child alike. Yet, the classroom dialect, i.e the artificial dialect of the classroom, bears no relation to the child's dialect or, in fact, to any natural form of language.

Convergence between the school's and the child's dialect is minimal, as can be seen from the following tables showing the relationship between the school's, the teacher's and the child's dialects (SD, TD and CD, respectively) in the public and private schools (EPu and EPr, respectively):

TABLE 1

PHONOLOGICAL VARIANTS (TOTAL: 14)

RELATIONSHIP	EPu		EPr		CD/SD	
	Child	Teacher	Child	Teacher	EPu	EPr
CONVERGENCE	8		9		-	3
DIVERGENCE	6		5		14	11

TABLE 2

SYNTACTIC VARIANTS (TOTAL: 12)

RELATIONSHIP	EPu		EPr		CD/SD	
	Child	Teacher	Child	Teacher	EPu	EPr
CONVERGENCE	5		5		1	2
DIVERGENCE	7		7		11	10

However, we believe that at the level of discourse the public school exists as a world apart.

Private and public schools differ as to the quantity and quality of teacher/child interaction. While in the private school interaction evolves as part of a personal language exchange between teacher and child, in the public school it is next to non-existent. Where it occurs, it is instrumental and immediate as in this exchange recorded in one of my

literacy class observations:

Teacher: *Sabe o que ẽ angu? É feito de quê?*
((Do you) know what is angu? Is (it) made of what?)

Pupils (choral response): *Fubá*
(corn flour)

Teacher: *(pointing at fu):* *Que sílaba ẽ esta?*
(What syllable is this?)

Pupils (choral response): BA

Teacher: *FU. Vou fazer duas linhas de FU*
((I) am-going-to-do two rows of fu)

Pupils: *(silence)*

And the teacher writes two rows of the syllable FU on the blackboard.

From this exchange the total lack of communication between teacher and pupil is self-evident.

We must admit, however, that both schools show a greater or lesser degree of classroom specific interactional norms, as shown in the following dialogue:

Teacher: *Camilo podia ter usado o cordão grande?*
(Camilo could have used the thread long?)

Pupils (choral response): *Não.*
(no)

Teacher: *Por quê*

(Why?)

Pupils (choral response): *Podia !*

((He)) could !)

This exchange shows that the child has been initiated into the school society. He/she is now able to interpret overt language on the basis of what was intended by the speaker but not effectively said. The teacher's inquiry expressed by "why" was read by the child as "wrong". So, the easy way out was to try the opposite option. There was no question of resorting to reason for an answer.

The following sample is reminiscent of American classroom language policies as reported by Baratz (1970):

Teacher: *E isto aqui o que ẽ?*

(And this here what is (it?))

Pupils (choral response): *stoju*

(Pencil-case)

Teacher: *Stoju não. Estojo. Stoju não existe. Stoju ẽ*

(Stoju no. Estojo. Stoju no exists. Stoju is

uma maneira errada do gente dizer que

(a manner wrong of-the one say that

precisa corrigir

(needs to-correct)

Pupils: *(silence)*

(Note: This is an instance of spoken written language variation. In this case, / es'tozo / is orthographic reading, whereas / 'stozu / is the normal casual local pronunciation.

Such exchange emphasizes the suspicion that the classroom (or the school for that matter) is an artificial speech community, with its own principles and norms.

Our interest in the classroom discourse, therefore, encouraged us to look at language function (or use) in the classroom, which seems crucial to the understanding of academic failure, since the classroom dialect has some form but a very limited function.

Coulthard (1979) discusses one aspect of the relation between discourse and grammar which is the lack of fit between form and function in speech. I have drawn from his approach the concept of illocutionary force, originally adopted by Searle (1976) and Austin (1962), in an attempt to extract from the data the underlying rules of use and to identify the speech acts performed by the teachers.

To do this, I analysed 65 utterances which were ramdomly selected out of the total number produced by the public school teachers and 65 collected in the same manner from the private school teacher's repertoire.

Coulthard suggests that to communicate is to make sense

of what one says. He offers promise as an example and says that one thing is to know the meaning of promise, another thing is to know how to perform the social activity of promising, i.e the illocutionary force of the utterance. According to him, formal education has the task of "solving the problem of relating the verbal activity proper to the universe of discourse..." and "to extend the child's repertoire of rules of use".

My analysis of the 65 utterances selected out of the bulk of the public school teacher's verbal performance has revealed that public education in Brazil is not performing either of the tasks suggested by Coulthard, firstly because there is hardly any verbal interaction in the classroom at all and secondly because we have discovered, in the process of our investigation, that the classroom discourse is principally a discourse of anger, as the data below will show.

Eight speech acts were identified in the 65 utterances produced by the public school teacher: (1) threatening, (2) expressing expectations, (3) ironizing, (4) informing, (5) giving orders, (6) giving permission, (7) evaluating and (8) moralizing. These speech acts are actualized through the following types of sentences: declarative, exclamative, conditional declarative, interrogative and conditional-imperative.

In the public school, the threatening act is accompanied by a highly recriminating intonation and carries blaming and stigmatizing connotations. Informing borders on giving orders, evaluating tends to expressing discrimination and discouragement, giving permission is close to giving orders and giving orders proper makes up the bulk of the public school discourse, i.e 60% of the utterances.

I think that it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the fit between form and function in the specific case of command in the pedagogical discorse, and draw a parallel between public and private school discourses.

Command, or the act of giving orders, is realized, in the public school, by 48 utterances, of which 28 are imperative sentences, 11 are interrogative and 9 are declarative. In the private school, imperative sentences do not occur. So, command is formally expressed by interrogative, explicative, declarative and conditional sentences. Apart from this, school-specific acts are rather revealing. Ironizing and moralizing are typical of the public school, while the private-school-specific acts are suggesting, asking, consulting, attracting attention, entertaining and greeting. The semantic content of the act of expressing expectations is also a dividing line between the two classrooms. In the private school, expectations are

always positive. In the public school they are consistently negative. Thus, if Rosenthal and Jacobson's claims (1968) are correct and teachers' expectations can really play the role of self-fulfilling prophecies, we can not expect public school children to succeed in school.

These results indicate that public school teachers, like most mothers in Brazil, hold the unconscious belief that children are deaf to any but the discourse of anger. This conclusion is reinforced by public school mothers' pleas to teachers to punish their children and give them a hard time in school, so that they can step into academic and social success.

It would be naïve to expect academic success under such conditions. Yet, this is only part of the problem as we see it.

On page 6 , I mention two other factors: (1) the absence of the play element in the pedagogical process, and (2) the public school child's previous knowledge and social background.

These factors are now being investigated, and I believe that the absence of the play element along with the role of children's aggression in the classroom may be a promising line of research. Unfortunately, it lies outside the scope of this work.

Though the absence of the play element in the public school is not a linguistic factor, I believe that it interferes with the acquisition of reading and writing by children in that it deprives them of an opportunity to relax and get away from the discourse of anger, thus contributing to make the classroom a gloomy place.

It is hard to overestimate the role of play in the school. Courtney (1980) informs us that British schools, among others, have long acknowledged it. He says that, in most British schools, 5-7-year-old children play most of the time. According to him, this pratice was gradually introduced into higher levels of education, with emphasis on dramatic play, and this explains the increasing number of British teachers' training schools offering Creative Theatre as one of its subjects.

This sounds like a return to Plato, i.e to the idea that education should start as play. Ironically enough, while Plato (In Courtney, 1980) says that the youngest of any species cannot hold their bodies still nor keep their voices quiet, language events in the Brazilian public school run counter to this, as teachers command "Shut up!" and "Don't move!".

I certainly believe that school and play, far from being mutually exclusive, should be seen as complemantary, or even

as the two sides of the same coin, and form the core of a truly educational programme. This widely acknowledged truth is far from being assimilated by public schools in Brazil.

However, the role of the child's social background in the educational process is not at all a negligible one. Considering the social origin of the public school child, it might be expected that a so-called democratic school knew the child well enough to be able to start him/her on a "familiarization programme" by means of which he/she would be exposed to reading and writing firstly as participants in the process. The failure of the educational system to provide for this "initiation" turns reading and writing into purposeless mechanic acts, with no personal or social significance. Readiness for acquiring these two ways of interacting with language is viewed, too, from a mechanical viewpoint rather than a cognitive or affective one, and the result is failure. In fact, those children who manage to work their way through the school system are not much better off than those who fail. This can be inferred from the poor writing and reading standards achieved by "successful" school children.

Government bodies often shrink from proposals for change by alleging shortage of funds.

However, we believe that changes are possible with no

extra cost, as long as the school assumes its educational function and education rediscovers its human foundations. I agree with Wadoworth (1984) that children are capable of complex learning. They are certainly highly knowledgeable beings linguistically and otherwise. I believe that their potential will not be turned to their greatest advantage unless the school realizes that the essentials of education are freedom, joy and purpose (Cf. Freire, 1964, Rogers, 1969, and Alves, 1984). As a particular instance of education as a whole, language education must be geared towards these basic principles.

Chomsky (1965) says that language processes are creative and therefore infinite. And I believe that language education means encouragement to pursue such infinity, to explore the unknown and to make discoveries which will help children develop their communicative competence creatively. The acquisition of reading and writing is a crucial part of the educational process. It is up to the school to make it a passage to creative personal expression and communication in speaking and writing or to turn it into a straightjacket banning once and for all the child's verbal interaction with the world. I am fully convinced that academic failure could be reduced to a minimum if language education and literacy programmes in particular turn these principles of creativity and self-expression into an everyday practice.

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